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Conspiracy buffs weaving theories at Hunt libel trial

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Richard Macaloon walked eagerly into Miami federal court last week with dark glasses over his eyes, a spy novel tucked under his arm and conspiracy racing through his brain.

Macaloon is a self-described student of the swirl of dark theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He, and several others like him, were in court to watch American conspiracy buffs' dream confrontation.

In one corner is attorney Mark Lane, the controversial author of the most widely read critique of the investigation into Kennedy's death.

In the other is convicted Watergate figure E. Howard Hunt, whose notoriety and one-time CIA career has made him a prime target of opportunity for conspiracy theorists.

Hunt is suing Lane's client, the ultra-conservative Liberty Lobby, for publishing a 1978 article suggesting that Hunt was about to be linked to Kennedy's mur-



Hunt

der.

But as far as the small cadre of conspiracy hobbyists watching in the gallery are concerned, it is Hunt who is on trial now.

"It's a vertigo of horror," Macaloon says of what he has heard over the years about Kennedy's death.

For instance, he says, "not very many people know" that then-Vice President Lyndon Johnson also was shot in Texas that day by the conspirators, but that Johnson's wound was kept secret. Nor do people know, he says, that someone has altered most microfilm copies of the first New York Times stories about the assassination.

Bob Morrisette, a square-jawed ex-Marine and Fort Lauderdale police detective sergeant, is less credulous but equally fascinated by Hunt and Lane. When he heard about the trial last weekend, Morrisette immediately took vacation to go watch the first week of the trial.

"At home I have 68 books on the Kennedys, and 31 on the assassination," Morrisette says. He brought with him a couple of Hunt's spy novels, which Hunt autographed for him during a court recess.

Morrisette won't say whether he suspects Hunt. But he is convinced there was a plot involving the combined efforts of the CIA, organized crime and

anti-Castro Cubans. The clues, he says, are "uncanny, mind-boggling."

"You know, Hunt is really an interesting man," Morrisette adds. "If he confessed on the stand in there. I wouldn't hold it against him now. It's been so long."

Jim Hatcher, however, is less forgiving.

Hatcher, a longtime subscriber to Liberty Lobby's Spotlight tabloid, says heatedly that Spotlight and Lane are the only ones in America telling the truth.

"The CIA is handling Hunt's defense here," Hatcher insists, apparently forgetting that Hunt is the one who sued. "They're crooks and thieves just trying to destroy Liberty Lobby."

Through much of the trial, Hatcher and a companion mutter in stage whispers whenever U.S. District Judge Jame Kehoe overrules an objection from Lane. "It's a kangaroo court," Hatcher complained outside. "The judge is intimidating the jury."

Each day, the small gallery has been largely empty, other than the handful of buffs and a few reporters and courtroom artists.

"Where are the people?" Hatcher demands. "They're being kept away by the CIA."

He dismisses the idea that, 21 years after the fact, only Hunt, Lane and a few conspiracy hobbyists really care anymore.